Fine Feathers

Novelized from Eugene Walter's Drama by the same name.

By
WEBSTER DENISON

CHAPTER XVIII—Continued.

"Wait a minute," he said quietly. "That isn't all. I thank you, Brand, for your solicitious care for me." He emphasized the word noticably. "But I have been doing some thinking of my own in the last half hour and my plans don't seem to go on at all where yours leave off. It might interest you to know, before you go, that I am going to stay right here and tell the truth from first to last—from the time you came to Staten Island, until Mrs. Reynolds received a letter from you the other day showing that you had voluntarily squared a criminal transaction for me at the bank."

As he finished Bob's fist came down on the little center table and almost shattered it. There was the vigor and determination that Brand had had to respect once before when he had loosed his wiles on a more gullible recipient. But now, in this crisis, he had not even considered the chance of opposition to his will. First astonished, then thoughtful, his florid features now revealed their old cunning.

"You play the game big, Reynolds," he said at last. "Either this is a holdup right, or you have gone clear crazy."

"All right. Rave all you want to, Brand. It can't do any harm now. I told you last week there were two ways to get out of it all: One was money and the other was to make a clean breast of it. One can't have all he wants all the time. You had your chance ten days ago and you threw it away. I gave you my terms and you took advantage of my helplessness and ignored them. You stayed away and paid that paltry $10,000 at the bank. You thought you would frighten my wife; that your magnanimity in releasing us from immediate peril would impress her and that in the end she would welcome the release you offered. Well, you succeeded with her but not with me. For her sake I was almost inclined to let matters drop, but this terrible affair has changed it all. We have taken human life, and a lot of it, and some one has got to pay, so if anyone is going to take the Lusitania, you're the man who had better hurry and pack his grip."

Brand stepped quickly to Reynolds, a tower of indignant rage. Trapped or cornered he was always Brand; always ready to put his back to the wall and fight—in the open if he couldn't fight from ambush. Bearded and almost beaten now, he quivered in his wrath and shook a threatening fist straight in Reynolds' face.

"You're a big, blasted baby and an imbecile!" he cried. "You play the quitter now and I'll make you regret it to the last day of your life. I'll fight and I'll win as I always have. You can't keep a man with money in jail. Those three words can't be grouped in the same language! But what's the use of talking," he added disgustedly. "You can't lay down now if you want to. You haven't got the nerve to send that girl there to the penitentiary for six or eight or ten years, to come out a broken woman—not enough of her left to suggest who she was. Do you know what prison does to men, Reynolds? Breaks 'em—body, mind and soul! Well, what will it do to a woman, then? To your wife? For if we go she goes with us. I've told you that and I mean it, so I guess my bluff's about as strong as yours."

He turned partly to Dick and, as if to cinch his threat, added:

"And I'm not sure but that our virtuous friend here will be keeping us company. That's law and you know it."

"Bob," cried his wife, creeping to his side and cuddling against him as if she saw in Brand some hybrid monster whom she really feared, "I'll go. Anything you say, dear! I'm not afraid—not afraid." Weeping softly, in obvious contradiction to her courageous stand, she nestled closer to his side.

We stand upon the brink of a high precipice and looking down are obsessed with a strange desire to jump. The thought of life has vanished in a vale of endless depths—the hold on it is infinitesimal. A bird flying overhead, startled by the strange intruder in his realms, drops a twig he is carrying to his nest. The tiny bit of wood flutters to the mountain top and at the precise moment that we have all but signed our passport to other worlds the twig falls at our feet. The sound of it is scarcely audible, but slight as it is we hear it, turn, and the spell of self-absorption and abandon is broken. We lose no time in climbing back to terra firma.

So Reynolds, possessed with the idea of self-sacrifice—self-destruction, if necessary—anything to bring to justice the man he blamed for all his wrongs and for the awful climax that had just come, grew stronger in his purpose, more fascinated in the purport of it, with every word that Brand used to dissuade him. Even Brand's reiterated threat concerning Jane had lost its power, but the sound of her voice came to him like the sound of the falling twig. It restored not the instinct of self-preservation for self alone, but the sense of duty to her. He, the one who had sworn to protect her, was the only one who could protect her now. If he failed her and mollified the sting of conscience by confession he would only shift the burden of his sin from his own shoulders to others not meant to bear it. Involuntarily his arm closed about her and he drew her to him. In the mingled look of love, pity and protection he gave her Brand read the sign of surrender and tried to clinch his cause.

"You've got to think of your wife, Reynolds," Brand urged, "even if you don't of yourself. The thing's done—you can't undo it. Besides, we believed the dam was strong enough. Only the most extraordinary conditions brought about its collapse. That lets us out. If we act sensibly we'll come good and clear."

But hope of immunity such as could be bought with Brand's power was not Reynolds' goal and the millionaire's expatiations on the possibility of it served only to irritate him the more.

"Money and lawyers and pull won't square murder, Brand," he said contemptuously, "and that's just what we committed. We have killed men, women and children for a few dirty dollars to which we had no right and some one has got to pay."

"My God!" the millionaire exclaimed impatiently. "You'd preach your life and liberty away—and that of your wife, too—for the sake of hearing yourself talk. Men—women—and—children—a handful of Dagoes and Polacks that the world's better off without. A few brats who couldn't fill a useful position if they did live to be men and women. How do you know it wasn't an act of God? He brought the water there, I didn't. But that's enough. I want to know what you're going to do? If you're going to talk I want to get ready for you. Now come on. Do you go or do you lay down?"

Reynolds surveyed him coolly.

"I'll let you know, Brand, just what I'm going to do. Before you leave here tonight you'll have no doubt about your course, but now I want a word with my wife—alone. If you don't mind, you and Dick step up to my den and I'll let you know when I'm ready. It'll be only a minute or two."

When they had gone he led her to the divan.

"Just a second, dear," he said tenderly. "I'll be right back and then we'll talk it over for the final solution."

As he passed into the adjoining room the telephone rang and Jane went to it apprehensive of the worst. It was a news association inquiring for Reynolds.

"He's—not in," she faltered. "No, I don't know just when he will be. Going away? No, I think not. You will have to see him yourself. In the morning? Yes, that will be a good time. Not tonight. That's all I can say. Good-by."

She hung up the receiver with a little gasp of relief. It had not been as bad as she had expected. But it was only a matter of time. She knew that. Already the newspapers had connected him with the catastrophe and there would be no end to the interviewing and dreadful questioning.

Bob returned and sat beside her. He had heard a part of her talk over the phone and surmised the meaning of it, but he made no mention of it.

"Jane, dear," he said softly as he took her hand, "you have never been sorry you married me, have you?"

"Why, Bob," she replied startled, "what are you saying? You know I haven't and never could be."

"But, darling, I have made an awful mess of it—of our life, I mean, for no man could have asked for a better wife. I have always loved you more than anything in life. Perhaps—perhaps," he continued haltingly, "I have loved you too much—that is, too much for your own good. That is not impossible, you know Jane. Love is always first, but there are times when we must temper it with reason and resolve. You must understand me, sweetheart, for after this I want you to know and feel that everything I've done and everything I do is for you."

Some strange note of fatality in his low tones alarmed her. Her startled eyes searched his and she pressed closer to his side.

"Why, even when you had taken a stand with Brand and I felt so—so much on the outside," he went on, "I loved you as I never thought it was possible for a man to love a woman."

"I never felt that way, dear," she interrupted. "I mean, that I was standing with Brand. Bob, you know that, don't you?" she cried appealingly, and the tears of self-condemnation started from her eyes while she begged—almost demanded the extenuation that she knew was not rightfully hers.

"Yes, I know it," he answered gently. "And you see, sweetheart, I was right when I said I was to blame. Just me. No one else. I have been at fault since the first day back there in the bungalow when you and Mrs. Collins went to the matinee and you came home with the new hat. I told you it didn't matter about the butcher—that everything would come out all right. Since that day we have been piling up these things—these crimes, dearest—yes, crimes. I knew it all the time. And I knew it as well as I knew that I loved you, that sometime the day would come when we—when I—would have to settle. But I kept you in ignorance. I was afraid to spoil your happiness, afraid to tax your love, and I let things go on until now, out there in that valley, whole families—just as dear to each other as you and I—just as important in the world as you and I, are gone—wiped out. I promised to protect you and all I have done is to lead you blindly from every decent thought—"

"No, no, Bob," she interrupted vehemently. "It was I who did the leading, not you. You simply followed me."

"But when a man does that, Jane, it is he who must pay the penalty, if there is one to pay. He should be stronger—the thing that she should lean upon. It has always been that way. Her sin is his sin, if he makes no protest when he knows, or makes no determined effort to right things, and I have not done that. Jane, dearest, I've decided one thing. The time has not come, nor will it ever come, when it will be right for you to ruin the rest of your life up—" He stumbled for a word, for he could not bear to use the real one—prison. "You must be spared the misery and degradation of that horrible thing and I've found a way out of it for both of us. I am going to take it and in time you will believe it was the only way. But always," he murmured, pressing her to him, "no matter where we are we'll always love each other—always."

"No matter where we are?" she echoed, answering his look that seemed to penetrate her very soul. "No matter where we are? What do you mean, Bob? Are you going away and leave me?"

"Yes, darling. For a while at least, we must separate. I cannot bear to have you a fugitive, chasing about all corners of the earth with the fear of guilt in your heart and the dread of capture ever at your door. You must have liberty—a way to live your life out in all the sweetness that must come into it after all this suffering. And you will know that I am always with you, loving you and guarding you the best way God will let me."

The infinite tenderness of his voice now unnerved her completely so that, though she saw or felt some dire omen in his words, she was helpless to protest them. She sank into his arms and they were clasped together in one long passionate embrace.

The lights of the room danced before her eyes as their lips parted. She could scarcely see him as he gently drew away from her and stepped lightly toward the telephone. He called a number that was strange and meaningless to her.

"Hello," he said, "police headquarters? Connect me with the Ninety-seventh, please." A pause— "Hello! Ninety-seventh? Send a man to four—two—six Marion road— Yes, immediately. It's a suicide."

For an instant she was stunned, but as she sprang toward him her cry of horror mingled with the report of a pistol. She caught his arm as he fell and they sank to the floor together. But she was too late. Reynolds had paid the price and paid alone.

Dick cleared the half dozen steps from the first landing at a bound and Brand came stumbling after him. The reporter knelt quickly beside them.

"Is he gone?" the millionaire panted breathlessly.

The reporter's eyes swept over the lifeless body of his friend and his hand went lightly to his heart.

"Yes, he's dead," he answered softly. "I think he's been planning it a long time and he knew just how."

"It was the best thing he could do," Brand said coolly. "The best for himself, for her—and—for me. Suicide's a confession, and that lets us out. I'm going to get out of here, Meade. Take care of the police and the papers."

Brand stepped quickly to the door and passed out into the night.

A low moan, the cry of a broken soul, announced returning consciousness to the stricken wife.

"Jane," whispered Dick as he bent over her and lifted her gently to her feet, "shall I telephone?"

"No," she answered hoarsely. "He did."

"To whom?"

"The police."

"Then they'll be here at once." He helped her back to the divan. "Listen, Jane," he announced with an air of command. "I'll do the talking. I was a witness; ill health, you know, a collapse from overwork. They may know me."

She made no reply and a ring at the doorbell told him that the moment had come for the supreme effort on behalf of the friend he had so loved.

"Remember, Jane," he cautioned again, "not a word."

He stepped to the door and opened it to the police.

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Remorse is more endurable than suspense. We approach the scaffold with stouter hearts than we await the verdict that may sound our doom. We look more resignedly upon the dying one. Crushed and bowed down as she was by her husband's tragic death Jane found a sort of solace in the very exquisiteness of her grief. The sacrifice he had made for her was complete. To the world at large—to all save her and Brand and Dick, Reynolds' suicide was but one of those every day sordid affairs of modern life—the symbol of failure and a weakling's surrender. But to those who knew the truth the act was invested with the dignity of a martyr's. It had saved her from the shame and horror of an expose that might have come at any time; he had paid in full the price of her folly.

Reynolds gone, Brand stifled all investigations of the dam's collapse with a certainty he could never have employed with Reynolds living. The engineers and chemists who now examined the shattered cement pronounced it of the proper quality and the man who passed it at the time of the construction was dead. Like all investigations of the kind there was much outcry and clamor at the start, but with delays and court continuances and lack of specific charges the matter waned and was soon forgotten. Brand took good care that the press learned of the dead man's financial dissolution and to the public mind this accounted for his self-destruction.

So, Jane saw Brand immune and unruffled while she had only the memory of a better man's love to help her drown the voice of conscience. In the bitterness of her sorrow and self-abhorrence there came times when she was moved to risk any fate for herself that she might bring down some expiation for the tragedy of the dam and Bob's death upon the head of Brand. But in such moments the face of her husband shone before her and she heard again his loving words of abnegation: "I have found a way and in time you will believe it was the only way." To open now the pages he had sealed forever would be but poor recompense for his sacrifice. No, she must go on and bear in silence.

(THE END.)

JUST THE SAME KIND OF GIRL

Modern Maid, in All Essentials, Is a Worthy Copy of Her Mother and Grandmother.

Every now and again somebody asks, in print, this question: "What has become of the old-fashioned girl that helped her mother wash the dishes?" Probably the same question has been asked since the time of Noah and will be asked until the end.

Mary Lyon, when she provided for the establishment of Mount Holyoke college for girls, stipulated that all the household work in it should be done by the students. That rule was enforced rigidly up to a recent date, when the directors and faculty, feeling that the practice might have become outworn, made the domestic tasks of the institution optional for the undergraduates.

But when the girls of Mount Holyoke were requested to announce their wishes on the subject, 748 of the 800 elected to continue in the tasks of sweeping corridors, washing dishes, setting tables and making up beds.

There is no need to worry about the American girl, even if she does wear gowns the sight of which seems to preclude all idea of work on her part. She isn't saying much about it, but she is in all essentials the same kind of girl our mothers and grandmothers were.

Heart Needs Care.

Acute heart strain is practically impossible in the young, healthy and well-nourished adult, but quite likely in all others. Once it occurs the heart is incapable of extra work and fails when called upon to do it. The doctor argues, therefore, that one cannot be too careful to economize in the work laid upon this organ.

According to one physician, he who retires to bed at ten instead of twelve saves the heart 876,000 foot pounds a year. Lying down a half-hour lessens its labors in the same period by 219,000 foot pounds. If our Sundays were spent in bed the yearly relief to our hearts would amount to nearly one million foot pounds.

He does not venture to even estimate the relief that would come were we to abstain from violent emotions, especially anger.

Not Quite.

"There is one profession which would suit no one down to the ground."

"What is that?"

Aviation."

Occasionally a man laughs at a joke on himself, but he never really means it.